MTS

Visionary Leader

Casino Club

October 24, 2014

This is a very great and unexpected honor and I am deeply grateful to McCormick Theological Seminary and the Board of Trustees. Thank you all for being here and for your interest in and support of a unique and important institution, McCormick Theological Seminary. It's truly wonderful to see old friends – from the McCormick Board and Fourth Presbyterian Church (And I am particularly grateful for and delighted by the presence of the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, The Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner. Shannon is bringing fresh, creative leadership and vision to a congregation that will always be close to my heart —and a congregation that has a long an important relationship with the seminary that predates all of us).

I'm also grateful for the presence of my family—most of whom are here—DB & RA, SB & S. Brown, JRB & Eleanor, AB&M.MCM, only Brian and Jillisan are in San Diego. Also Carolyn my granddaughter, Andrew and Justin Everage, Caitlin Andrew and Casandra Dair.

I suppose any reflection on the topic of leadership ought to begin at the most basic, intimate level—with one's own family. I've been blessed—for 55 years—to be married to one of the great leaders in all of history—whose leadership style has been steady, deceptively quiet, relentlessly inclusive and unconditionally loving. Sue has always pretended to defer, allowed me to rant and rave and pontificate until I tired of it and then we did what she always wanted to do in the first place. It has been an altogether happy arrangement, and so far seems to be working.

As for my five children—their observation of my leadership within our family is best reflected in a sweatshirt given to me by Diane, our oldest –It's dark blue and announces in bold white letters: "Teamwork is a Group of People Doing What I Say." I have to add that Diane wears that mantle comfortably herself and someday will inherit that sweatshirt.

My relationship with McCormick Seminary began before I knew a single thing about it. When it came time for me to be "Taken Under Care" of Huntington Presbyterian (the way we used to call the beginning of the ordination process) I had decided to enroll at The Federated Theological Faculty at the University of Chicago and Chicago Theological Seminary. When I appeared before the Presbytery and this fact was announced there was a terrifying moment of confusion. Someone stoop up and said "The University of Chicago is nothing but a hotbed of atheistic liberalism." Then a blessed saint interrupted—There's no seminary at the University of Chicago." "He is going to one of our own in Chicago—McCormick." I exercised the first role of leadership—don't interrupt with facts when things are going well. So they voted me in and I've been grateful to McCormick Theological Seminary ever since.

My next experience at McCormick was, frankly, a nightmare. The summer before my senior year, that same Presbytery announced that I had to take Greek if I intended to be ordained. The only option was a McCormick summer term, 2 years of Greek in a concentrated 8 weeks, 4 nights a week. We were living in Dyer, Indiana at the time where I was serving as a student pastor. And so I drove the thirty miles or so from Dyer to the McCormick campus and took Greek. Drove home every night and studied Greek all day before driving back to McCormick. It was not an eventful summer. Somehow Sue managed: I passed the course and subsequently was ordained.

One of the great privileges along the way was an association with McCormick after we moved to Chicago in 1985. McCormick faculty and staff were a significant presence in the congregation. McCormick president, Jack Stotts had been the Interim Preacher at Fourth Church and became an invaluable advisor, counselor and dear friend. I was also appointed to the Board of Trustees and Dave Ramage, President, and I also became good friends. I served on the Search Committee that nominated Cynthia Campbell as McCormick's President and Cynthia and I became good friends. My time on the Board and as President was a good time for me and it was a great privilege to co-chair, with dear Myrna Christopherson, the campaign committee to raise the money for the new building.

Along the way I came to appreciate greatly McCormick's distinguished history and its unique place in American Theological Education today. If there is one thing everybody in this business knows for sure, it is that in this rapidly changing environment in American culture and in the Churches, that theological education faces new and unprecedented challenges. For many, the old model simply doesn't work any longer. The reasons are many—sociological, fiscal, institutional, ecclesiastical. If ever there was a time for bold, innovative thinking with these, in many ways most traditional of institutions, it is now, today. And McCormick Theological Seminary, I believe, is positioned beautifully, strategically to be a leader. We have a President in Frank Yamada who is smart, understanding, creative and strong. We have what I think is the very best place in the world for theological education to happen; beside one of the great universities in the world, in a dynamic modern American city with all the challenges all cities face—poverty, and violent crime, rough and tough politics, but also great wealth, elegant art and music and a uniquely global culture. The only thing missing is a little world class baseball on the north side. But when it comes to theological education, I often wonder why anyone would want to study anywhere else.

This is about leadership, so, a word or two about that.

David Brooks wrote a fascinating column in the New York Times last month (9/12/14) under the heading The Reluctant Leader. He argued that history's best leaders have frequently been reluctant—and that some of the worst leaders desperately wanted to lead. As he often does, he began with the Bible and Moses—the ultimate model of the Reluctant Leader, Moses, who tried every excuse he could think of to get out of the responsibility of leading Israel out of captivity.

Brooks cited Max Weber on the essential features of political leadership—passion, responsibility, judgment and concluded that where circumstances ask for, beg for leadership, those are the characteristics you want and need and must have—passion, responsibility, judgment.

And it occurred to me that those are precisely the very characteristics of any institution that can and should lead—a political party, a judicial system, congress and state legislature, a church, a theological seminary.

Passion—responsibility—judgment.

Again, my profound gratitude for this honor and for your presence this evening.